

'Custom fit' students' education, Las Cruces superintendent says

LAS CRUCES —The old model of doing business isn't working for Las Cruces Superintendent Stan Rounds. So he's changing it.

Rounds is supplementing the traditional school model — students and teachers in a classroom with textbooks, a whiteboard and so on — with "menu-driven," malleable alternative education that seeks to reach students in different ways.

"Our system doesn't fit student expectations and needs for all our kids," Rounds said. "Most kids it does ... but there's a block of students we just can't get to the finish line."

Maybe those students need or want to work during the day and can't fit in day-time classes. Maybe they need hands-on learning that shows how their course-work applies to their interests and daily lives.

"What if you were able to custom fit education around the student rather than force the student to fit educational models?" Rounds said. "We've got to do business differently than we are today."

The changing educational model is a reflection of changing society, Rounds said, mentioning the growing number of viewers who record TV shows or watch them online rather than at the allotted broadcast hour. Technology is changing expectations, he said.

"It's a market," he said. "And I don't aim to be behind the market."

Online courses, a new middle school program and San Andres High School are three aspects of the district's changing approach to education.

Online instruction

Last year, LCPS had five 100 percent

online students. Next year's fully online enrollment is still up in the air, but the district expects an increase in the 1,000 or so students who took some online and some traditional courses, LCPS online coordinator Marcy Oxford said.

"We've just really found a niche with a bunch of students," she said.

Last school year was also the first each of the six district high schools had its own online coordinator. The schools also have their own learning coaches and distance-learning labs, while the district has two full-time online teachers and about two dozen adjunct staff teach some online courses.

Part of the push to online courses comes from a state requirement that students take one online, honors or AP class before they graduate from high school.

Rounds hopes to have 60 percent of students will take at least one virtual class — either fully online or with online components — in the coming years. The blended model looks more like the real-world work environment, he said.

The district is also looking to work with parents who home school their children, offering them access to their online classes, Oxford said.

"Why are we changing?" Rounds said. "The threshold is changing."

MVTC

Education alternatives at the middle school level are still a "conundrum," Rounds said.

Enter the Mesilla Valley Training Center.

The location, at 400 West Bell St., has been a site for high school students to take vocational classes part time then return to their traditional high schools for academics.

Now, MVTC will exclusively host eighth graders — 38 this school year — and will blend the vocational components with the academic curriculum.

Under the model — called project-based learning — math, language arts and sciences will be integrated into building, welding, computer, horticulture and culinary activities rather than stored in separate classes.

Project-based learning helps engage students who might not learn well in a traditional setting, helping keep them in school and on the path to graduation, Rounds said.

"If we can gather their interests and grab their discovery, we have that chance," he said

The school has its own assistant principal, four returning teachers and one new teacher, as well as three educational assistants.

A pilot group of students this spring provided a test run for the model. Students built an arbor using the Pythagorean Theorem ($a^2 + b^2 = c^2$) rather than simply learning the equation in class, LCPS Special Education Director Glenda Rodriguez said.

"They got to actually build it, and that's what makes this school so unique," Rodriguez said. "The other schools don't get to do that."

San Andres High School

Rounds may rebrand San Andres into an "early workforce institute," restructuring the school to help students earn GEDs or diplomas and develop the skills they need to be successful in the workforce and make money, he said.

The district's alternative high school has been struggling to raise four-year graduation rates and attendance rates. Rounds will work with the school's new principal, Kathie Davis, who begins July 1, to determine how to rebrand the school.

He doesn't expect staff at the school to see the same significant changes as when it was last restructured in 2008. That year, every teacher had to reapply for a position.

Why now?

Rounds said he spent the first few years of his time as superintendent looking at management issues, educational "potholes" and stability. Now he is ready to change and improve existing programs, he said.

"Why now? Because I'm still losing kids," he said.

Las Cruces averages a four-year high school graduation rate of 71.2 percent. Statewide, that number is 70.3 percent.

"I'm urging malleability in the system and learning how to teach kids, to grab them," Rounds said. "... I know very few students who haven't been able to thrive when we gave them the right model."

All of the ideas are a work in progress, Rounds said, looking at models that work in other parts of the country, personalizing them and tweaking them again when they don't work.

"Wouldn't it be stimulating if alternative education didn't become credit recovery but another model of education? Not about kids failing, but a kid learns in one way and we meet that need?" Rounds said. "Alternative education is going to bend the box."

Lindsey Anderson can be reached at 575-541-5462. Follow her on Twitter @l_m_anderson